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ABSTRACT

Students drop out of school because of a variety of family, economic, and racial factors that can be categorized as either alienation, lack of motivation, or disadvantage. The key to reducing the dropout rate is helping youth to overcome their sense of disconnection. Students with low motivation to attend school have shown improvement in school attendance and retention after participating in career education. However, casual vocational exploration is not enough; major concentration in a vocational program is more helpful in student retention. The vocational experiences that are most closely related to reducing the dropout rate include the following: (1) more systematic and intense efforts to identify and help potential dropouts before or at entry into vocational programs; (2) program activities to enhance school climate and reduce absenteeism, class-cutting, and drug and alcohol abuse; (3) activities to enhance parents' support; (4) more career exploration prior to high school; (5) improvement of transitions through a vocational program to direct dropout-prone students to job-specific skill training courses; (6) linking work-study experiences with students' programs and objectives; (7) alignment of work-study programs to students' overall school plans and goals; and (8) activities to increase dropout-prone students' participation in vocational programs and to enhance linkages between these programs and other school experiences. Examples of successful programs are given. (KC)

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REDUCING THE DROPOUT RATE THROUGH CAREER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

OVERVIEW

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OVERVIEW

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

REDUCING THE DROPOUT RATE THROUGH CAREER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

The social, economic, and political costs of the dropout problem have been well documented. According to Brown (1985), the costs in lost tax revenues and payments to welfare recipients incurred as a result of the dropout problem amount to $20 billion annually. Willis (1986) cites figures stating that, based on estimates that the lifetime earnings loss of a single male dropout is $187,000 and that of a single female dropout is $122,000, the lost lifetime earnings from a high school with a 40 percent dropout rate is $3.2 billion. The shrinking entry-level labor pool (estimated to represent 16 percent of the population in 1995 as opposed to a previous level of 25 percent) is also making it increasingly difficult for business to ignore those members of this pool whom they could previously overlook—poorly motivated youth who lack fundamental literacy skills and are unacquainted with the responsibilities of the world of work (Brown 1985).

Why Do Students Drop Out?

Examining the reasons why students drop out, Willis (1986) discusses the following correlates of educational risk: family structure and poverty, race and ethnicity, language, residence, economic displacement, and gender. Indicators of educational risk, according to Willis, are student attendance, school continuation rates, academic performance, involvement in school activities, student behavior, attitudes toward school, need for employment, nature of family support, involvement in out-of-school activities, and involvement with the juvenile justice system. This does not mean, however, that dropping out is just a minority or urban problem. Noting that since 1970 the dropout rate for blacks has decreased nationally, whereas that for white students has edged up steadily, Brown (1985) prefers to categorize highrisk youth as either alienated ("uninterested in or dissatisfied with the values represented by school and work" and lacking in "motivation to succeed in expected ways" [p. 9]), disadvantaged and alienated, or simply disadvantaged.

What Is Career and Vocational Education's Role in Dropout Prevention?

In view of the risk factors, then, the key to reducing the dropout rate is helping youth to overcome their sense of disconnection. Miller and Imel (1987) attest that students with low motivation to attend school have shown improvement in school attendance and retention after participating in career education and that vocational students who have participated in career education are more likely to complete the vocational program they have selected. An analysis performed by Mertens, Seitz, and Cox (1982) on data obtained in 1979 and 1980 interviews with the New Youth Cohort of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Force Behavior confirmed that, all else being equal, the more vocational classes students took, the less likely they were to drop out of school. The relationship between vocational education and the choice to stay in school was, however, only statistically significant in grades 10 and 12 (and negative but not significant for grade 11). Furthermore, the effect was quite small in both grades 10 and 12 (Mertens, Seitz, and Cox 1982).

Miller and Imel (1987) offer some reasons for the size of this effect when they discuss the importance of the quality of the vocational education experienced by different students. They point out that casual exploration through vocational courses or work experience that is not related to learning goals is less effective than is major concentration in a vocational program. Thus, they recommend that vocational and career educators desiring to improve student retention develop individualized plans (including educational goals, strategies to reduce barriers to the achievement of goals, and timeliness for monitoring progress on these goals) such as those used with handicapped students. They further recommend small programs with 2-6 teachers serving 25-60 students. They also say that the most successful programs are those in which students are encouraged to be cooperative rather than competitive.

What Kinds of Programs Are Needed?

Having examined the vocational experiences that were most closely related to reductions in individual students' decisions to drop out, Weber (1986) recommends the following: (1) more systematic and intensive efforts to identify and assist potential dropouts prior to and at entry into vocational programs; (2) program activities to enhance school climate and reduce absenteeism, class-cutting, and drug and alcohol abuse; (3) systematic awareness and educational activities directed toward enhancing parents' involvement in program planning and support; (4) more extensive career exploration and related career education experiences, particularly prior to and at the transition into high school; (5) improvement of transitions through a vocational program to direct dropout-prone students to job-specific skill training courses; (6) review and evaluation of work study experiences for dropout-prone students to ensure that they involve concrete objectives and program experiences, clear linkages with students' overall school programs, and built-in evaluation activities; (7) review of rules governing vocational program entry to ensure student access to and participation in vocational and work study programs with firm ties to overall school plans and goals; and (8) activities to increase dropout-prone students' participation in the vocational program and enhance linkages between students' vocational experiences and their other school-related experiences and activities (pp. x-xi).

What Are Examples of Successful Programs?

The literature contains many examples of career and vocational programs that have been successful in keeping students from dropping out or helping dropouts reenroll in and complete high school. Such programs may be run by schools exclusively, may be based on a school-business partnership, or may even involve counseling to parents.

Willis (1986) mentions the work done by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) confirming the relationship between parent involvement and school achievement. One school-business partnership that encourages parent involvement in career counseling and planning is the Peninsula Academies

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program, which is based at Menlo-Atherton High School and Sequoia High School in California's Silicon Valley. Students are matched with mentors from cooperating companies who volunteer to spend time with students in career-related big brother or big sister roles, to take students to their companies to expose them to the world of work, and to work with parents in helping the students formulate career plans (Justiz and Kameen 1987).

The Peninsula Academies also provide a program of formal classroom instruction to 30 students per year per academy. Students are provided with 3 years of instruction in computers or electronics beginning in the 10th grade. Distinctive features of the program include its highly work-related curriculum, exposure to real jobs through work experience and paid summer employment, and a final incentive of a job waiting for all students who graduate from the program and high school. Area firms contribute lab instructors on loan, funding, equipment, mentors, speakers, field trip sites, and summer jobs (*Peninsula Academies Program* 1984).

Other exemplary career and vocational education programs for high-risk students include the following:

- **Middle College High School** at La Guardia College in New York City exposes high-risk 10th- to 12th-grade students to career options through internships and work placements (Brown 1985).
- **Cities in Schools,** a multisponsored program focusing on youth and their families, which is headquartered in Washington D.C., presents high-risk youth with a coordinated package linking social and business services to the educational system (ibid.).
- **The Philadelphia High School Academies Program,** which has been operating since 1970, is distinguished by its combination of personal attention and follow-up with actual work experience to provide disadvantaged inner-city high school students with marketable job skills in the electrical occupations, business, auto mechanics, and health care (ibid.).
- **The Cooperative Federation for Education Experiences** (COFFEE) is an exemplary public-private partnership involving the Digital Equipment Corporation and the public schools of Oxford, Massachusetts. Based on a blend of academic study, occupational training, counseling, preemployment experience, and physical education, the program combines academic instruction in a regular high school with training for entry-level positions in high-technology fields (Justiz and Kameen 1987).

Suggestions for ways in which school leaders, business leaders, and policymakers can help dropout-prone youth are presented in *Reconnecting Youth* (Brown 1985).

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